Constructing Masculinity:

How Three Grade Eight Boys Explore the Boundaries of Masculinity

Through Writing Toward a Bio-Cultural Theory of Reading and Learning

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As I am reading grade eight boys' creative writing samples, the following passage catches my attention:

> Mean while Sunshine stood up and skipped to his little garbage can and
> threw the weed away. As he turned around to continue his walk he saw
> that Princess was not around-anywhere. "Princess Oh Princess where are
> you come back to me," said Sunshine. In a deep distressed voice Sunshine
> started to cry, not really cry but ball his head off. He skipped his way very
> quickly toward the house with his arms flaying in the air. "MOMMY.

> MOMMY where are you. Princess is gone and I can't find her." "Stop
>
> crying and tell me what happened alright," the mother said in a whisper.[1]

In this excerpt, the story's adult protagonist, Grant Ferrie Winkle who watches gardening shows, lives in a two-storey pink Victorian house with blue shutters, and takes great pride in his flower garden, loses his dog Princess and turns to his mother for comfort. How should we understand this writing sample? Perhaps the writer is demonstrating that males are sensitive and seek out their mothers for comfort. Or perhaps it is raising our awareness of non-traditional ways of being male. Or perhaps the writer is negotiating what it means to be and not be male. In the writing samples I collected from three boys in a grade rural eight English language arts classroom, I claim they are exploring the boundaries of masculinity and establishing gender norms of what it means to be male. It seems as if they are exploring and experimenting with perceptions of how males are and are not to behave.

Background

During the last decade of the twentieth century, the phenomenon of the 'poor,' 'lost' and 'under-achieving' boy came into the media spotlight across the Western world (Blair & Sanford, 2003; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Millard, 1997; Skelton, 2001). This international recognition marked a profound shift from the 1980s focus on girls' poor achievement in the 'harder-edged' traditionally male subjects of mathematics and science (Maynard, 2002). By the 1990s, a focus on the under-achievement of girls began to shift as tests revealed that girls were catching up with and in some cases overtaking boys in science and mathematics. In many of the stories told by journalists, boys were represented as losing out in both educational and social contexts as a new 'super-breed'

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[1] Text presented as written by the student.

of girls and women were taking control of schools, jobs, relationships and their bodies (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). At the same time, in the 'soft' subjects in which girls had traditionally excelled, boys continued to trail behind. This was particularly the case in English language instruction where concerns about boys' attainment in reading and writing became the focus of a great deal of research, government reporting and media speculation.

It is against such a backdrop that books have been written and reports published. This concern is what originally caught my attention about boys and their "literacy 'crisis.'" As a former English teacher who has observed boys' and girls' differential achievement patterns, like others I have had only limited success encouraging boys to publicly portray themselves as readers and writers. Every under-achieving male and female is a small tragedy for the individual, but a cohort of under-achieving males will have multiple effects on society. Large-scale assessment results have provided a quantitative analysis of gendered literacy achievement. However, what has been absent from the literature is an understanding of boys and their writing experiences. As such, the purpose of my initial study in 2004 was to examine the writing experiences of three grade eight boys. During the study, I attended to the themes of boys' writing and their writing practices, how the boys felt about their writing and how they related it to their success as adults, and if the boys gender-stereotyped writing.

As I focused on the boys' writing experiences, the writing sample findings indicated they were defining the boundaries of masculinity. In our interviews, the boys told me they liked to write about their interests such as sports and the activities they pursued with their friends and fathers. Likewise, there were several writing samples from

each participant that contained elements of 'warrior' discourse. As defined by Jordan (1995) 'warrior' discourses are stories young boys write (as well as pictures they paint and the games they play) that "depict the male as warrior, knight, errant and superhero" (p. 39). In researching the differences between boys' and girls' writing, Maynard (2002) explains that boys tend to write action-oriented fiction that often incorporates fantasies about power and domination. For example, she says that boys' stories tend to be aggressive, blood-thirsty, and are often about authority, control and emphasize superheroes and bad guys. Furthermore, she states that boys' stories tend to include an assertive central character and a strong sense of spatial awareness by concentrating on the size of things.

Several of the boys' fictional stories were focused on control, domination, and male power. However, while the boys were exploring what it means to be male through these stories, they were concurrently constructing what it means to be not-male (Stalwick, 2005). The pendulum swung in opposite directions – the stereotypical macho male and the effeminate male with little middle ground between. What I wish to further explore in this article are the two ends of the pendulum, namely how the boys were exploring their perceptions of what it means to be (or not be) male.

Theoretical Framework

Gender, Identity and Discourse

Writing is a social practice that shapes and is shaped by gender. Through writing, "students learn culturally-accepted ways of being girls and boys through the language they use to write their narratives and through interactions with peers and teachers that centre on their own and other's writing" (Belliveau & Peterson, 2005, p. 7). Belliveau and Peterson explain that students demonstrate ways in which they are constructing their gender identities through writing. Although there is a continuum of boys' and girls'

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writing content, generally boys' stories tend to include more violence than girls' stories, boys' stories tend to be more action-oriented, boys generally include their friends in their stories, boys' stories can have either happy or disastrous endings, boys' stories usually only include male characters apart from their mothers, and boys tend to write about topics within tertiary territory such as technology, sports, space, and war.

Stereotypical gender writing patterns have been repeatedly found in research. (See for example, Fleming, 1995; Graves, 1973; Gray-Schlegel & Gray-Schlegel, 1995-96). Peterson (2001) hypothesized that "boys and girls feel the need to demonstrate knowledge about gender roles and relationships to be considered socially competent males and females" (p. 7). Furthermore, social pressure for gender conformity exists because boys and girls believe gender differences are natural and crossing those gender lines is unnatural especially for boys. Students in Peterson's (2001) study were very aware of the constraints on their writing as a result of cultural views of what it meant to be a boy or a girl in their classroom. For example, boys were seen to be abandoning a position of power if they chose to write on 'feminine' topics. Girls, on the other hand, had more freedom in trying out possible identities within the more powerful gender position if they chose to write on 'masculine' topics.

I argue that masculinity is a social construct reified through "a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1990, p. 13), one actively constructed through an awareness of social and cultural norms. Gender is not merely an early result of an infant's exposure to patriarchal values which become set in stone during adulthood, but is a continually on-going, reaffirming process (Litosseliti & Sunderland, 2002). As explained by Cameron (2001), "gender has constantly to be reaffirmed and publicly displayed by repeatedly performing acts in accordance with the social norm" (p. 49). She further theorizes that when we

speak we reveal something about ourselves. The same could be argued for writing. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) assert that "in communicative interaction, people do not represent the world abstractly but in the course of and for the purposes of their social relations with others." They add that you cannot semiotically construct (represent) reality without simultaneously identifying yourself and relating to other people in particular ways. In other words, as humans we are constantly negotiating our identities within the larger social milieu. Likewise, Horsman (1990) posits there is a seamless connection between identity and discourse, reasoning that who we are is constantly shaped by the taken-for-granted concepts and assumptions embedded in discourses. So conceptualized, the role of discourse and its meaning-making is central to identity.

Murray (1984) supports the relationship between discourse and identity and theorizes that writing involves discovering, beginning with all that we have known since we were born. He sees writing as thinking and says that we write to discover what we know and then what we need to know. In addition, our words are like symbols that "allow us to play with information, to make connections and patterns, to put together and take apart and put together again, to see what experience means. In other words, to think" (Murray, 1996, p. 3). In fact, the act of writing often precedes understanding and it is precisely through writing that students can initiate or promote understanding of their own experiences and the world around them. By choosing their own writing topics and writing from the inside, Yagelski (1994) reasons that students "write to explore their experiences within the broader contexts of their lives" (Tobin & Newkirk, 1994, p. 215).

Keeping in mind that grade eight is a significant time of change in a boy's life, it is important to recognize that writing provides a space for them to explore and understand their developing identities. In grade eight, boys' identities are shifting as they are moving beyond the world of boys and discovering and negotiating the world of men. Thus, it is

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highly probable that through their writing the grade eight boys' in this study were exploring masculinities and communicating their emergent understandings, perceptions, values and attitudes.

Identity and Masculinity

Within the last fifteen years, the multiple nature of masculinity has been theorized and explored in relation to language. Sunderland (1995) has argued that in some ways and in some contexts the boundaries of masculinity are more rigid than those of femininity. The prevalence of equality and equal opportunities discourses in the Western world creates more flexibility of identity or range of identities for girls and women than it does for boys and men. In other words, there are more ways of being acceptably female than there are ways of being male. Likewise, the 'crisis of masculinity' discourse represents males as suffering from a sense of being 'deprived' of both the expectation that they will be the family breadwinner, and of the opportunity to do so (Litosseliti & Sunderland, 2002). To the extent that such a crisis exists, it is indeed a crisis of identity. What does it mean to be male in 2006? In particular, what are these grade eight boys' perceived options for being male?

Influenced by Foucault, Butler (1993) reasons that discourse is constitutive of the phenomenon that it regulates and constrains. Her theories are couched in the notion of performativity and the idea that identities do not pre-exist but are performed in a highly regulated fashion. In fact, she argues that identities are constructed iteratively by copying the performances of others with the same identity. As such, identity formation and discourse allow us to be perceived in a particular way by our audience. In other words, discourse and identity are seamless; the way in which identity is performed and recognized emerges from discourse. To summarize, in many cases gender is constructed

through an awareness of social norms and learned acceptable ways of being male and female. In constructing our identities and defining ourselves within the larger social framework, writing functions as a space to think, understand, and negotiate ways of being male or female.

Methodology

The boys' writing samples I analyze here are taken from a research study I undertook in 2004 in a rural grade eight classroom. The participants for this study were three grade eight boys, their parents, and their classroom teacher. The participants were chosen through purposeful sampling to represent a cross-section of grade eight boys and the factors considered were their writing ability, overall academic achievement, attitude towards school, and their willingness to participate in the study. I chose to use maximum variation sampling to identify student participants who represented a wide range of writing abilities: below average, average, and above average.

During my two months of research in this rural kindergarten to grade eight school, I observed the three boys during class, analyzed their writing and drawing samples, interviewed the boys, their parents, and classroom teacher, and conducted a focus group interview. Over the course of my research, I collected approximately 10 writing samples from each participant. The writing samples were teacher directed and their assignments were written primarily for a teacher and peer audience. The writing samples were mostly narrative; however, they also wrote some poetry and illustrated short stories. Each of the boys was interviewed twice, the classroom teacher once, the parents once, and I conducted a focus group with the boys towards the end of the study. However, because I wish to concentrate on the writing itself, the focus of this article is on the writing samples collected from the boys and supplemented with interview data where required.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis, as defined by linguistics, is used to refer to the analysis of both spoken and written texts (Carter, 2001). In each case, the aim is to analyze the way texts work across the boundaries of single sentences or utterances to form whole stretches of language. In other words, discourse analysis involves examining how bits of language contribute to the making of complete texts. Firth (1951) reasons that language is context dependent; it is "only meaningful in its context of situation" (cited in Coulthard, 1977, p. 1). Therefore, to analyze discourse in written text is to analyze language in context. To analyze the boys' writing samples, I first began coding at the word level and then created broader categories as follows: character construction, 'warrior' discourse, intertextuality, and voice.

Findings

The boys explored masculinity through four themes: character construction, 'warrior' discourse, popular movies and books (intertextuality), and experimentation with voice. Although these elements were present in each of the boys' writing samples, the boys were exploring masculinity in separate ways. For instance, on the one hand Steven explored masculinity through a hunting story casting two capable male hunters as protagonists. On the other, in another story he explored non-male behaviour through casting an effeminate male as the protagonist. In the following writing excerpts, I expand on these four themes. The excerpts I have chosen are verbatim and I refer to each of the three participants as David, Steven, and Nathan.

David

Several of David's narrative writing samples focus on revenge and violence, key themes of 'warrior' discourse. An instance can be seen in a story whose protagonist, a

Navy S.E.A.L, discovers her spouse is being held hostage. What is noteworthy in this case is that the writer chooses a strong female protagonist instead of the traditional male.

The story begins when Sergeant Jodie O'Leary arrives home from a training mission to find her husband being held at knife point. Without hesitation she takes control of the situation. She wields her weapons and shoots the intruders; however, she is unable to save her husband who is slain. In the following excerpt, David describes a stand-off between the protagonist and one of her foes:

> As the door burst open she charged in, gun in hand. Three husky men dressed in woven silk finery turned to fire the Destuche D5K machine guns. The Sergeant ducked and rolled behind a large steamer trunk. As soon as the thugs stopped to reload, she jumped up and put a shell in each one of them. The fourth, a robust, cabbage-faced man was left cowering behind the bed, holding Shamus up as a human shield. "DROP IT!" The fatty yelled, whipping a knife up to Shamus' throat, his many chins wobbling. Jodie instantly dropped her weapon.

> "Very good m'dear, now don't do anything rash and we'll be just fine," he continued.

> "Who do you work for?" Jodie inquired harshly.

> "That's my business m'dear, but since youse asked nice like, I'll tell youse. I work for Sub-Zero, and that's all the info I'll be givin' out, but now I really must be going," he finished.

> "P-please don't h-hurt me," Shamus stammered.

"Sorry, too late!" ranted The Fatty, and with that he slashed Shamus'

throat.

"NOO!" screamed Jodie as The Fatty launched himself out of the second

story window. Jodie stooped to pick up her gun, ran to the window and

shot The Fatty in the back as he was loping away. When she was sure he

was dead, she ran back to Shamus. As she bent over him, she heard a

ruckus downstairs…

In this excerpt, the author experiments with gender roles by choosing a strong female

protagonist and tends to portray the male characters as weak, effeminate or both. In the

above excerpt, Sergeant O'Leary shoots the handle off a door, bursts into the master-

bedroom, shoots each of the thugs, ducks and rolls behind a trunk, jumps out of a

window, and continues to display exceptionally capable defensive responses. Throughout

this story, she dominates and out-wits her male aggressors, triumphs over evil, and the

stage is set for revenge and further plot development or another series instalment.

In contrast to the strong female protagonist, the author portrays the male

characters as weak, clumsy, and inept. The fourth assassin is described as a "robust,

cabbage-faced man" who cowers behind a bed and uses slang vernacular such as

"m'dear," "youse," "nice like," and "givin'." Similarly, the protagonist's husband,

Shamus, is also portrayed as a weak, stuttering male with wobbly chins who must rely on

his wife to defend him. It is interesting to note that The Fatty is shot in the back by

Seageant O'Leary as he attempts to flee the murder scene. The story concludes with her

single handily out-witting and defeating her clumsy, male foes as Sub-Zero is placed in a

maximum security prison.

Further to the weak male characterization, it is interesting to note the names of the two primary males in this story: Shamus and The Fatty. The name Shamus brings the word shame to mind, and the name The Fatty does not suggest a strong, dominant, male villain. It is as if the author is mocking the inferiority of these males by assigning them derogatory names and he further emphasizes this point by killing off all the weak male characters.

Another feature of this story I wish to attend to is David's use of 'warrior' discourse. This plot-driven story is focused on Sergeant O'Leary unsuccessfully defending her husband and avenging his murder. As such, the plot pivots around Sergeant O'Leary's quest for retribution and the three page story is generously peppered with frequent acts of violence. Language such as: "charged in gun in hand"; "turned to fire the Destuche D5K machine guns"; "put a shell in each of them; "holding Shamus up as a human shield"; "whipping a knife up to Shamus' throat"; "slashed Shamus' throat"; and "shot The Fatty in the back" contain considerable amounts of violence. In fact, if this grade eight writing sample were to be rated, it may receive an unsuitable rating for audiences under the age of fourteen.

There were several instances of 'warrior' discourse in David's other writing samples. For instance, in Dufniall's Story the protagonists are two males who train, fight, and defend their medieval village from evil aggressors. It is an action-packed story featuring five battle scenes focusing on revenge, power, control and domination. Numerous battle scenes and Viking armour are described in great detail and the story contains many detailed drawings of swords, armour, arrows, battle scenes, and a destroyed village.

In David's writing samples, there were elements of intertextuality as he included features of well-known movies. In his Navy S.E.A.L. story, the plot line and

characterization is analogous to Lara Croft, Tomb Raider. Lara Croft, a female

combination of James Bond and Indiana Jones, is a strong imaginary character of

mythical proportions who cunningly out-manoeuvres her villainous foes. Similar to

Sergeant O'Leary's untraditional Navy S.E.A. L. occupation, Lara Croft is a tomb raider

who enjoys collecting ancient artifacts from ruins of temples and cities worldwide, and

does not mind going through death-defying dangers to get them. She is skilled in hand-to-

hand combat, weapons training, and foreign languages and since the movie and its sequel

were released, Lara Croft lives on in the form of action figures, videogames and the like.

Her physical attributes and the plot lines are enormously appealing to boys in this age

group. Although David did not say he based this story on Lara Croft, James Bond, or

Indian Jones plot lines, he expressed an interest in this type of literature and the video

games, movies, and other types of media associated with it.

      As one reads the story about the Navy S.E.A.L., there is a distinctive voice

present in both the story's description and dialogue. It is apparent that David's control of

language is exceptional as this plot-driven story adopts a feel reminiscent of an Indiana

Jones or James Bond story line and now a female protagonist such as Lara Croft. As the

context of the story is described, there seems to be a consistent stylized voice in the

story's description and dialogue. For example, the story begins with Sergeant O'Leary

yelling "Honey, I'm home" as she enters her house. When there is no response, again she

calls "Shamus? Are you there? The last syllable of her sentence bounced around the

monstrous house and came flying back at her." The "honey I'm home" quotation was

made famous in the movie *The Shining* and the remainder of the story is described in

secret agent James Bond larger-than-life detail as stolen diamonds enter into the plot and

the battle scenes are fought within a huge master bedroom, a nearby abandoned mansion, caverns beneath a house, and a cave.

Similar attention to detail and word choice is evident in the story's dialogue as the author reveals his characters' personae with attention-grabbing discourse that furthers plot development. The antagonists' dialogue includes some unusual lexical items such as "m'dear" and "youse" for example, which develops the character and allows the writer to experiment with a variety of voices. For instance, Shamus is made to appear weak as he stammers and stutters and the evil aggressors cower and speak in accents. Furthermore, there is attention to how the dialogue is delivered as Jodie "inquires harshly," "Shamus stammers," "The Fatty yells" and further on in the story Jodie "inquires," "replies hotly," "laughs," and "growls." By including unusual dialectic lexical items the author is exploring and experimenting with character construction, economic class, and voice.

Including details in the dialogue permits not only the characters to come to life, but also allows the writer to experiment with different voices. What is interesting is that Sergeant O'Leary participates in very little dialogue compared with her antagonist counterparts. She is assigned questioning dialogue; however, in comparison with her foes whose dialogue furthers their characterization, she is not given a distinctive voice. As readers, we know that Sergeant O'Leary is very capable of defending herself and others, but we are only provided with glimpses of who she is through her brief questioning of her foes. It is as if by assigning very little dialogue to the protagonist, the writer is unsure of what she would say. Or perhaps Sergeant O'Leary is the strong silent type whose actions speak louder than her words.

Steven

In Steven's writing samples, we find similar overlapping themes of gender constructions, 'warrior' discourse, intertextuality, and voice. I have taken key writing

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excerpts from the story below to highlight the themes I wish to address and provided the story's context. I begin with an overview of the writing excerpt and follow with commentary.

Steven explores the 'warrior' discourse and what it means to be male in a legend he writes about a young boy, Squinto, and his father. This plot-driven short story features a frantic struggle between the boy's father and a pack of wolves. The story's protagonists are described as skilled hunters and from the age of four, Squinto is adept at hunting, trapping, tracking, and ambushing animals. At the age of fifteen, he "knew everything that his father knew like how to make weapons and which animals were good eating and which were horrific eating." This untitled three-page story is set in Rupert's Land in 1645 and begins with the young boy's mother dying in childbirth.

While hunting one day, Squinto encounters a strange man and his daughter. The man offers his daughter to Squinto in exchange for hunting rights to the land. Squinto and his father decide that it would be "nice to have her since she could cook and pack the food" for their hunts. After this brief discussion with the stranger, the plot quickly shifts as Squinto hears an owl's cry. Squinto has been well trained by his father and he knows that the owl's cry means there are wolves near. He finds his father as a pack of wolves begins to attack him. Steven describes the attack:

At that moment the father was tackled not only by one of the surrounding wolves but by four vicious furious starving wolves. Painful dreaded screams executed the air and the sounds made the young hunter fearless of the wolves charging the alpha male Squinto took a vigorous slash at the throat. The wolf yelped and ran away but the other wolves were hungry and were now attacking the young hunter. All of a sudden there was dead

silence and Squinto woke up lying in a warm cave that he had to drag

himself to.

In this writing extract, a dangerous and frenetic attack scene is created as Squinto attempts to save his father from a pack of wolves. Adjectives such as "vicious," "furious," "starving," "painful dreaded screams," "fearless" and "vigorous slash" convey the brutal nature of this attack. Male domination and power are key features of 'warrior' discourse. In this case, man conquers wild animals and lives to hunt another day.

There are elements of power and domination as the protagonists in this story are independent, tough, capable, and skilled woodsmen who are familiar with hunting and tracking animals. The father and his son are competent hunters who live off the land and are able to survive against the odds. Squinto is characterized as an independent boy who from his birth has had to look after himself and learn survival skills from his father. Together, they are alpha males as they over-come harsh living conditions, track animals and survive an attack by a pack of wolves.

Unlike the Navy S.E.A.L. story where the characters predominantly become known through dialogue, there is very little dialogue any where in this story and we come to know the characters through their actions and descriptions. The two women in this story, Squinto's mother who dies in childbirth and the hunter's daughter, are assigned subordinate roles and neither is given a speaking part.

Following the wolf attack, the story continues with a conscious and hungry Squinto shooting an arrow into an owl. However, instead of killing the owl it is now able to turn its head completely around:

Squinto watched as the owl got up and spun his head right around scaring

the hunter the hunter felt sorry and pleaded to god that all owls should be

like this one so that it would be able to look all around.

Again, there is an element of power and domination as Squinto shoots an arrow into an owl's neck. As a result, the owl is now able to turn its head 360° and this intertextual reference is reminiscent of the movie *The Exorcist* or Rudyard Kipling's *Just So* stories.

In three of Steven's writing samples, it seems as if he is experimenting with voice as each writing piece contains a distinct tone. In the hunting story about Squinto and his father, there is a sombre tone which seems to recognize the seriousness of their harsh circumstances and the author alternates between referring to the Squinto as "the boy," "the hunter" and "Squinto." It seems as if there is a distancing effect created by approaching the text through both an omniscient third person voice. Similarily, when the author describes Squinto shooting the owl, he changes noun forms. Instead of continuing to refer to Squinto as a proper noun, he refers to him as 'the hunter' a common noun. Perhaps it is a shift from the specific to the generalized, the unnamed, all those who share the same qualities as Squinto. It is as if Squinto is being disassociated with the deeds of 'the hunter.' Squinto is a real person with real feelings and takes on the unfeeling hunter persona when necessary. Squinto, the boy, becomes the adult male hunter. By disassociating Squinto from 'the hunter,' perhaps Steven is negotiating what it means to be male and indicating that at times men have to do things they would rather not do.

Additionally, in a separate piece of writing there is a distinct voice in Steven's exploration about gang activity based on the book "The Outsiders." In this piece, what is

note-worthy is there seems to be a deliberate 'dumbing-down' of language as there are several misspellings and colloquial language is used throughout. For example, there is a conversational tone such as: "well, from my point of view…", "an example of an associate is well Johnny…", "then well there's the Fringe well the name is kind of easy to tell but I will go into detail if you don't mind?" Likewise, some of the misspellings include "*tuff,*" "not sure *weather,*" "pack of *wolfs*" and "you will get your *but* chewed off." Some other curious language choices include referring to female gang members as "ladies."

In this gang writing sample, it seems as if Steven is experimenting with voice by using a combination of slang and conversational language. The conversational and informal tone of this piece has the effect of welcoming the reader's response and opening the door for further conversation and exploration. Likewise, the repetition of "well," "like" then there's" "that is like", etc. communicates the author's voice as he offers his understanding of gang hierarchy. Perhaps through experimenting with gang language the writer is modelling his understanding of how gangs communicate.

Finally, it is interesting to note Steven's exploration of masculinity in a fictional narrative called "The Missing Poodle" which I noted at the beginning of the article. This short story about a young man named Grant Ferrie Winkle, aka Sunshine and his miniature poodle, Princess, portrays the main character as an effeminate male who becomes distressed when his dog Sunshine runs away. In the excerpt provided at the beginning, the author ridicules Sunshine's awareness of an insignificant weed. Additionally, he exaggerates and mocks Sunshine's reaction to losing his dog and portrays him as a frail person who needs his mommy to comfort him. To me, Sunshine's over-wrought responses are exaggerated and consequently scorned. It is as if Steven is

ridiculing what Sunshine attends to (nature) what is valuable to him (his dog) and where

he seeks comfort (his mother).

This effeminate overtone continues throughout the story as a depressed Sunshine

spends the day in his pink bedroom, crying, not eating and asking for "tissue."

Recognizing his distress, Sunshine tries to pull himself together and looks in the mirror

saying, "Don't lose your composer. Pull yourself together we don't need any one freaking

out. Pull yourself together and hop in that lemon yellow Cadillac and go look for

Princess." The author continues this effeminate male stereotype by describing Sunshine's

reaction when he discovers rats: "He ran out [of the house] screaming like a school girl."

While searching for Princess, someone tries to con Sunshine into paying more than he

should for some supplies and Steven takes this opportunity to add another derogatory

effeminate insinuation: "The person at the teller said, 'that will be 12,589.98 dollars

please. What you guys are crooks where's you gun and mask jeas give a Ferry a break.'"

The story concludes with Sunshine giving up, filing a missing person's report, and the

case is solved by more competent people at the special victim's unit.

In these writing excerpts, I have identified effeminate vocabulary that appears to

be deliberately chosen as indicated by its frequency and liberal use throughout the story.

Through the story's mocking, exaggerated and derogatory nature, it appears that Steven is

taking a position on effeminate male characteristics and is using narrative writing to

establish and communicate a voice. Likewise, it seems as if he is aware of this audience.

This writing excerpt was written with the intention of sharing it with his peers and others

with whom he can build social capital. Because the boys in this class liked to entertain

each other through their writing, it could be that the effeminate overtones in this short

story were meant to humour his peers. Perhaps Steven is exploring effeminate characteristics in males and is mocking these characteristics because they are beyond the boundaries of what he perceives to be acceptable male behaviour. Likewise, perhaps he is communicating to others that he knows how traditional males are supposed to behave.

Nathan

Evidence of 'warrior' discourse is seen in one of Nathan's short stories called "The Big Fight." The graphically illustrated 16 page story about a young boy whose father is a gladiator is beyond the scope of this article. As such, I have taken key excerpts to illustrate the themes of 'warrior' discourse, gender constructions, intertextuality and voice.

This untitled story begins as Maximus junior, the protagonist, plays wooden soldiers with his friend. Maximus junior's friend inadvertently offends Maximus' father's honour and in response to this affront, Maximus junior yells, "My dad could beat up your dad!" With this outburst, Maximus "sends the boy into a fit" and his friend runs home. Later, Maximus junior hears that his father, Maximus senior, will be coming to town to fight at the Circus Maximus and he is determined to watch him fight. Defying his mother's order to not attend gladiator fights, Maximus junior boldly enters the Circus Maximus and is promptly thrown out by a gruff attendant. He searches for a place to sneak into the amphitheatre; however, his efforts are defeated and he returns home to find both his parents waiting for him.

The following day, Maximus junior and his mother watch his father fight at the Circus Maximus. Noticing that his father is not wearing armour, and fearing for his life, Maximus junior shouts "Leave my dad alone!" Maximus senior dominates and controls his opponents, killing "a total of 10 men and 2 tigers by the end of the fight." The story concludes with Maximus senior receiving some minor flesh wounds and, "A paw mark

from one of the tigers that attacked him." Maximus senior promises his son that he will never again enter a gladiator ring and as a family they escape to a neighbouring country.

In Nathan's story, it is interesting to note how each of the family members is characterized. Similar to Steven's hunting story, there is very little dialogue and we come to know the characters through what is said about them and how they are described. For example, Maximus junior holds his father in high esteem, admires his ability to fight, and disobeys his mother in attempts to watch him fight. Likewise, Maximus senior is a respected and feared gladiator who defeats the odds and dominates his opponents. In fact, Maximus senior is so well respected that the amphitheatre he fights in, Circus Maximus, has been named in his honour. Maximus junior sees his father as a superior warrior and a hero. When his father's honour is called into question, Maximus junior defends his father, dominates his friend, and he sends his friend home crying. Maximus junior bears his father's name and, like his father, Maximus junior is a slave. They are both oppressed and ultimately doomed by their positions in society. In order for them to live as a family and rise above their oppression, the family chooses to flee Rome and begin a new life in another country.

Although the mother figure appears quite regularly in this story, she is assigned a subordinate role and the reader comes to know her peripherally. Unlike the father, Maximus senior, she is un-named, and we come to know her as Maximus junior's mother. She has been cast in a traditional home-maker role and attends to tasks such as washing, finishing her "chores," and plays an authoritative parental role. The one speaking line she is assigned is an apology on bended knee to an official whom her son has offended.

It is notable that both the topic and character's names bear a close resemblance to the movie *Gladiator*. For example, the contexts are similar -- the movie is set in ancient Rome and the familial patriarch is a feared gladiator separated from his family. The familial structure is identical – the family unit in the movie consists of a father, mother, and young son. The names are identical – the protagonist in the movie is also named Maximus. Lastly, a lack of armour and the battle scenes parallel the movie's battle scenes.

Upon further examination of Nathan's writing samples, I found additional examples of gender construction, intertextuality, 'warrior' discourse, and voice. In this short, violent excerpt, Justin Timberlake comes to Detroit; however, his presence is unwelcome. In response, Eminem, 50-Cent and Rob Zombie, popular rap artists, decide to show Justin that he is uninvited. The author establishes this background and describes the shoot-out between Justin Timberlake's body guards and his attackers:

> As he sat and waited for Justin he noticed two Suburban pull up. One with 50 cent and Eminem in it and the other with g-unit as they hopped out and they ran in side shooting then someone threw a chair threw a window and every one started shooting then after several rounds every one ran out hopped in the cars and went different ways. In two days this brutal murder was all over the news that Rob did it because someone seen his car their.

Wrongly accused of Justin Timberlake's "brutal murder," Rob Zombie goes to jail and becomes a popular music artist. Eminem and 50-Cent elude persecution and the scene is set for an act of revenge. A year later, Rob Zombie tires of his popularity and jail sentence and decides he needs to "bust out" of jail. Rob Zombie successfully escapes, returns to Detroit, and his first act of revenge is to find Eminem and 50-Cent and "blow

up" their "million dollar mansions." The story abruptly ends with Rob Zombie avenging his jail sentence by successfully destroying Eminem and 50-Cent's mansions.

In this story, it seems as if Nathan is exploring polarities of what it means to be male. On the one hand, although he does not explicitly state that Justin Timberlake is homosexual, the author characterizes him as a "Pansy @$$" and "little fruit cake." On the other hand, there is a reference to taking steroids and the antagonists are portrayed as men who are violent, popular, and daring. It seems as if part of being male means acting in violent ways such as shooting others, blowing up mansions, busting out of jail, and avenging a jail sentence. Additionally, intertextuality is present as there are frequent references to musical celebrities Justin Timberlake, Rob Zombie, 50-Cent, and Eminem.

Lastly, it is noteworthy to consider the choice of street vernacular in this story. For instance, the author refers to "bodyguards," "stalkers," "shooting several rounds," "throwing a chair through a window," "brutal murder," "going to jail," "the real murderers were on the loose," "it was going down tonight," etc. Further language experimentation is seen in other writing samples where he writes: "shut that shit off," "damn cold out" and "pissed". Although the participants are not from a violent community, they are likely exposed to violent acts through different forms of print and media. Perhaps Nathan is writing for an audience of peers and feels as if experimenting with language will gain him social approval. Or perhaps, he is experimenting with class or violent vocabulary and is trying on a gang like voice or persona. I speculate that it is a combination of the two possibilities.

Conclusion

The boys in this study were exploring what it means to be male by writing 'warrior' discourse, exploring gender characteristics, incorporating intertextuality, and

experimenting with voice. First, the boys experimented with 'warrior' discourse by writing about hunting, gangs, gladiators, medieval battles, and reproducing James Bond type genres. Congruent with Jordan's (1995), Maynard's (2002) and Peterson's (2001) findings, the boys' primarily cast males as protagonists and their narratives were plot driven and all maximum revs. Using the metaphor of a car, Thomas (1997) describes boys' writing:

> If narrative is a vehicle, then boys like driving it for reasons which have nothing to do with carrying anything, or with passenger comfort. With boys, it's all maximum revs. Each action incident is another gear change and acceleration. It makes for a bumpy journey, with lots of screeching tyres, hilltop chases and spectacular crashes. (p. 2)

Indeed, the boys' were revving their narrative cars as their writing samples featured serial battle scenes, spectacular crashes, and angst-driven plots. In 'warrior' discourse, there is an aspect of sport as winners and losers are clearly established which is evident in several of the stories they wrote. Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) believe that for many boys, "Sport provides entry to a world of men. Coaches, older players, club supporters, school 'old boys' and other men will look approvingly on their success, welcoming them into a world of recognition and status" (p. 61). Likewise, the Gilberts theorize that sport holds a special place in the lives of many boys and men.

Blair and Sanford (2004) and Smith and Wilhelm (2002) emphasize the importance of social community with which the boys connect. In their longitudinal study, Blair and Sanford recognize literacy as a dominant social practice through which the boys in their study shaped their identities and developed and maintained close personal

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relationships. Similarly, Newkirk (2002) suggests that "literacy is intensely social -- literacies grow out of friendship" (p. x). As such, boys are likely to read and write material that can be transported into conversations with their friends.

Perhaps, as suggested by Blair and Sanford, the boys' 'warrior' discourse plots were a way to create social currency not only to enter into relationship with the world of men but also with each other. The boys in this class frequently shared their writing with their peers and they wrote not only for a teacher audience but also a peer audience. During our interviews, the boys told me they wanted to entertain and make each other laugh through their writing. David's father usually read his son's writing assignments before they were submitted to the teacher. As such, he was writing for a multiple audience of his peers, father, and teacher. Likewise, it is interesting to note that in Steven's hunting story and Steven's story about Julius Maximus, father and son are participating in sport together, whether it is hunting or performing as gladiators. During our interviews, Steven told me how much he enjoyed hunting and working on the farm with his father.

Although the students did not state specifically they were constructing what it means to be male through their writing, it appears that writing about sport and other action oriented narratives and writing for each other is a way to communicate and connect with what the boys enjoy, their peers, and as Gilbert and Gilbert suggest, their fathers. Additionally, by sharing and discussing their writing with each other and in David's case, his father, an element of gender policing existed within this classroom. Because they are writing for an audience of peers in addition to their teacher, the participants' choice of characters and plot lines are largely influenced by how their

writing will be received by their peer group. Many of these boys had known each other since kindergarten and were familiar with each other's interests, strengths, and social positions within the classroom. Would their writing entertain their friends? Would their intertextual references indicate they were familiar with pop culture and communicate their familiarity with it? They knew what types of characters and plot lines would be accepted and valued or unaccepted and devalued within their peer group. Creating characters and plot lines that are clearly dominant and hegemonic could be the participants' way of building social capital among their peers and a way of indicating they know how males are supposed to behave.

Secondly, through their chosen story lines and characters, the boys explored the boundaries of being male and, in some cases, what it means to be not-male. As research has shown, the requirement to display one's self as appropriately heterosexual often informs the ways in which many boys learn to police their masculinities (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005). By casting themselves and other males as protagonists, Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) suggest the boys are exploring what it means to be male through the lens of their characters. They are at 'play' with masculinity. It seems as if the boys in this study were communicating their masculinity by demonstrating they are indeed traditional males. At the same time, they were exploring their perceptions and social definitions of what it means to be and to not be male.

To a lesser degree, the boys were exploring their perception of ways of being female. For example, in the case of Steven and Nathan, the females were cast in traditional roles peripheral to the story's plot and in both cases the females were assigned care-giving characteristics. By contrast, David cast a Lara Croft-Tomb Raider protagonist

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as the central figure although it is notable that she says little and the antagonistic males are described as inept and clumsy.

Third, intertextuality incorporating plot lines, events and characters from popular movies and text appears in many of the boys' writing samples. For example, David's protagonist in the Navy S.E.A.L. story is analogous to Lara Croft-Tomb Raider; Steven's owl can turn its head around 360° reminiscent of the movie *The Exorcist* or Rudyard Kipling's *Just So* stories; and Nathan's protagonist is named Maximus and the story-line is comparable to the movie *Gladiator*. During our interviews, Nathan told me he loosely based his Maximus story-line on the movie *Gladiator*. Similar intertextual references beyond those I have identified can be found in other forms of literature and media; however, what is interesting to note is the boys were drawing on other types of literacies, media or print, to inform their characters and plot lines.

Lastly, the boys were experimenting with voice, whether through appropriating gang-like slang and colloquial expressions, writing dialogue incorporating Italian accents, mocking effeminate characteristics in males, or moving between an omniscient and third person voice. I speculate that experimenting with different voices in their writing allowed these students the safety and ability to explore the boundaries of masculinity whether through the voice of a dominant or effeminate male protagonist or strong female protagonist. Perhaps writing can function as a buffer between a student confined by his gender and a student exploring the possibilities of what it means to be male.

In their exploration of the boundaries of masculinity, it is possible that the boys were reacting to a feminine-dominated school and were portraying, for the most part, boys as masters and girls as passive. Perhaps they were writing of the world they know--

their fathers are the decision makers and their mothers live in support roles which was how some of their households were organized. Or, perhaps they were portraying what they have seen represented in the media when they watch 'male' movies and read 'male' books--perhaps the male characters are the dominant ones and effeminate males are silly or bad. What is fascinating in this study is the boys wrote for an audience of their peers and their teacher. Likewise, despite that they did not describe themselves as writers and they all said they did not like writing, it is fascinating how much these boys engaged in creative writing. What is disturbing is how narrowly the boys portray male behaviour. What if Steven's father were to give up on some challenge? Will he still have his respect? What if Nathan were to give up on a challenge, and need the support of his wife? Would he be able to survive this? As the boys mature, will they recognize other non-dominant hegemonic ways of being male?

It is important to remember that these findings are based on three rural grade eight boys' writing samples and so cannot be generalized. Also, the boys differed in their writing abilities, gender constructions, and ability to experiment with voice. Nonetheless, it is significant to recognize these boys were at "play" with masculinity as they constructed their characters and plot lines and negotiated their perceptions of what it means to be male.

Boys have long been criticized for their resistance to exploring alternative voices in writing. However, it seems as though these three boys were willing to experiment with voice albeit predominantly through 'warrior' discourse. Their willingness to explore voice and character construction indicates there is room for them to move beyond the confines of 'warrior' discourse and experiment with new genres. Perhaps exposing and

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encouraging boys to write in a variety of genres and voices would enable them to broaden

their boundaries and recognize the multiple ways of being male and human. Our

challenge as educators is to encourage them to "play" with multiple voices and genres to

extend their narrowly defined constructs of what it means to be male.

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